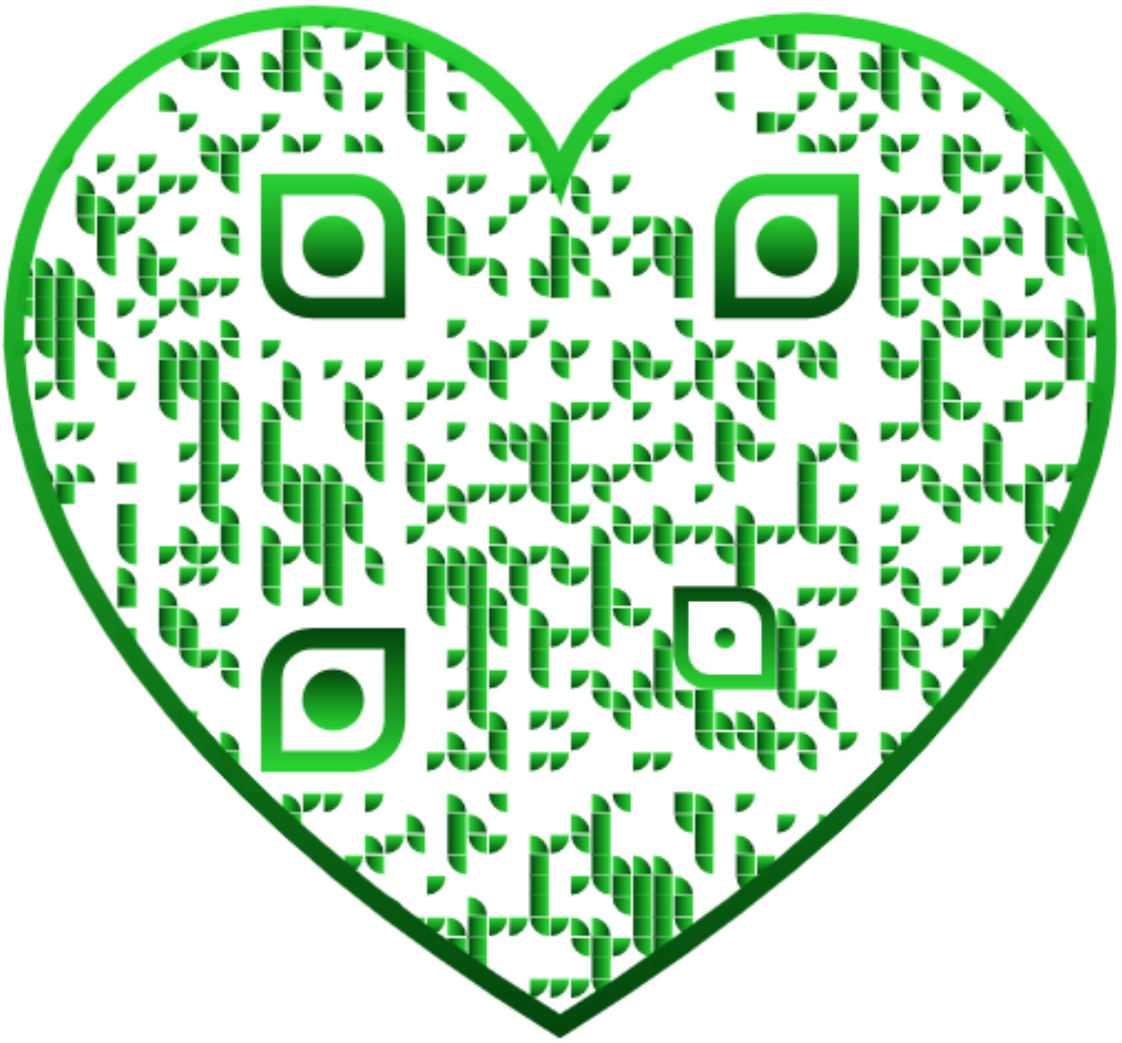
Mithra, Mithraism, Christmas Day & Yalda

K. E. Eduljee



Mithra, Mithraism
Christmas Day
&
Yalda

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Zoroastrian Heritage Monographs

Time saving Truth from Falsehood and Envy.
Falsehood holds the mask of deceit in his hand.
A 1737 painting by Francois Lemoyne (1688-1737). The artist suffered from severe depression and killed himself the day after he completed this painting.
In the Zoroastrian scriptures, the *Avesta*, **Mithra** is the guardian of truthfulness, keeping one's word and the bonds of friendship. Zoroastrianism presages a world when goodness will overcome evil, and truthfulness will overcome deceit and the Lie.
Every person needs to do her or his part to enable that goal to be reached – and to battle falsehood at every step.

MITHRA, MITHRAISM, CHRISTMAS DAY & YALDA

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Purpose of this Monograph

This monograph examines the following claims:

1. Jesus was not born on December 25;
2. Instead, Pre-Christian Romans celebrated the birth of a Persian god Mithra on December 25, then the date of the winter solstice;
3. Yalda is an old Iranian, perhaps even a Zoroastrian festival, that also celebrates the winter solstice and the birth of Mithra.

MITHRA, MITHRAISM, CHRISTMAS DAY & YALDA

PART I – MITHRA & MITHRAISM

1. Who is Mithra?

A. In Zoroastrianism

Mithra and its modern form Meher mean friend and ally. Meheraban, the quality of Mithra, means friendship, kindness and love. The name Meher is given to both boys and girls, while its older form, Mithra or Mitra, is predominantly a girl's name.

In Zoroastrianism, Mithra is a Fereshteh or Yazata (Izad), an angel and guardian of truthfulness, honesty, keeping of one's word – one's promises – and bonds. Mithra is also one of three angels who greet a soul on the fourth dawn after a person's demise. They are the guardians of a person's core values – a person's moral and ethical constitution.

The Hamazor handclasp carries with it all the values of Mithra. '*Hama*' means 'all' or 'all together' and '*zor*' means 'strength'. The gesture seeks to cement a beneficial, sincere and trustworthy connection as well as a bond of mutual respect, help and friendship.

Hamazor handclasp. Photographer & source unknown.

B. In Hinduism

Hindu scriptures call Mithra, Mitra – a god often paired with Varuna. Together they are the guardian gods of the cosmic and moral laws of Rita (similar to the Zoroastrian Asha).

While the Hindu scriptures give most of its gods human shapes, Mithra and Varuna were Asuras – invisible, not humanlike gods. Later Hindus gave the Asuras human shapes as well. However, it is still difficult to find images of Mitra.

C. In Pre-Christian Rome

In Pre-Christian Rome, the name Mithra became Mithras, a human-like god with little or no relationship to the Zoroastrian Mithra. The earliest evidence of Mithra worship ('Mithraism') in Europe dates to about 2,000 years ago.

2. What is Mithraism?

'Mithraism' is the modern name given to the beliefs of a sect that worshipped Mithras. Author Roger Beck says that while the ancient Roman Mithraists were not ethnic Persians, they thought of themselves as cultic Persians.

Persia

Since Persia was the dominant Aryan/ Iranian nation when ancient Greeks wrote their histories, Classical Greeks writers called all of Aryana (later Iran-shahr), Persia. It is like calling Britain, England.

The Romans had picked up beliefs about Mithra when their empire included eastern lands that were once part of the ancient Persian Empire, old Iran. Some form of a rather attractive Mithraic belief must have existed at that time in Iran – when Iran was ruled by the Zoroastrian Parthian dynasty from say 300 BCE to 220 CE.

Aryan

We use the word 'Aryan' in its original sense – before the term was appropriated and racialized by Europeans. Forms of the term Aryan are plentiful in the Zoroastrian *Avesta* and to a lesser extent in Hindu texts. The term Airyana-Vaeja (meaning Aryan homeland) evolved to Eran-vej and then Iran. 'Aryan' is simply an older way of saying 'Iranian'.

After the Romans adopted Mithraic beliefs from the Iranians, they gave their version of Mithra a human shape in the same way they gave their many gods human shapes. They also added the Roman Sun and Moon gods to their Mithraism. In this way, Roman Mithraism became a blended religion like the Yazidi religion, which is still practiced today in the Middle East. Like Roman Mithraism, the Yazidi religion also has a bull sacrifice and the Sun plays an important part in their beliefs.

3. Roman Mithraic Bull-Slaying & Zoroastrianism

A. The Bull Killing (Tauroctony) Scene

The main image we see in the ruins of cave-like Mithraic temples (called Mithraeums) is a humanlike Mithras killing a bull with the Sun god and Moon goddess looking on.

Other images show Mithras offering the sacrificed bull's meat to Sol, the Sun god. Roman Mithraic images also have zodiac signs and scenes indicating the journey a soul must make through the cosmos in order to reach its final destination – the Sun and the dwelling place of Sol, the Sun god.

The clothes Mithras is shown wearing in these scenes if what Roman artists used to identify Iranians. While some say the scene has a cosmic meaning, others say it shows a typical Mithraic feast where a bull was 'sacrificed' after which the temple's members ritually ate its meat. The scene

Mithra in 'Persian'/Aryan clothes & the bull-killing scene called a tauroctony. Roman gods Sol, the Sun god, and Luna, the Moon goddess, are in the top left and right corners respectively. This scene is on one side of a 2nd-3rd century CE two-sided altar slab. Other scenes show the Sun god Sol sharing the meat of the sacrificed bull. Image credit: Wikipedia.

can have both meanings.

B. Was Mithraism a Zoroastrian Sect?

While third century CE philosopher Porphyry wrote that Zoroaster was the first person to worship Mithras in a 'Persian' cave that had flowers and springs, Zoroastrian books have no such story and Zoroaster's own hymns called the Gathas, do not even mention Mithra. The Gathas in fact start with the soul of the cow's (also a metaphor for all of creation) cry for help to save it from being killed. Mithraists could have invented this story since Zoroaster was famous and respected by the Greeks and Romans. Making him a worshipper of Mithra would have given the Mithraist sect credibility. The Mithraeums try to imitate Zoroaster's supposed cave by being windowless.

Remarks by Classical writers such as Porphyry have led modern authors such as Franz Cumont (1868-1947) to add to this claim and directly link Roman Mithraism to mainline Zoroastrianism. Prof. John Hinnells of

Liverpool Hope University strongly rejects these claims as mere speculation. Hinnells states, "In no known Iranian text [either Zoroastrian or otherwise] does Mithra slay a bull." Hinnells decries the method of speculative scholars whose work he says is "so weak and ambiguous that this is merely adding theory to theory without any secure evidential basis. …Indeed, one can go further and say that the portrayal of Cumont is not merely unsupported by Iranian texts but it is in serious conflict with known Iranian theology."

In conclusion, there is little or nothing in common between Zoroastrianism and Roman Mithraism.

4. Yazidi Mithraic-Like Bull Sacrifice & Sun Cult

A. Who are the Yazidis?

The Yazidis speak a Kurdish dialect and are said to be a half-million in number. They live mainly in Iraqi and Syrian Kurdistan and came into the media spotlight because of their persecution by the Islamic State. Among many brutalities, the Islamic State forcibly and brutally enslaved Yazidi women and preteen young girls and children as sex slaves for their perverted men.

Northern Iraqi Kurdistan's Yazidi areas. The Yazidis are not restricted to this area and can be found north in Armenia. Image credit: Joshua Project.

Some Yazidis consider India to be their original homeland. Others say that they are one of the ten lost tribes of Israel who, because of the great Biblical flood of the Tigris/Euphrates Rivers, moved from their homeland in Northern Iraq to India, Afghanistan, and North Africa. Then about 4,000 years ago, they returned home.

Yazidi solidarity with Hindus & plea for help.

National Geographic states, "Yazidis forbid converts and abide by a strict caste system – a vestige, along with a belief in reincarnation, of their time in India thousands of years ago – that prohibits not only marriage with non-Yazidis but also intermarriage between the castes."

B. Lalish Pilgrimage Town & Sheikh Adi

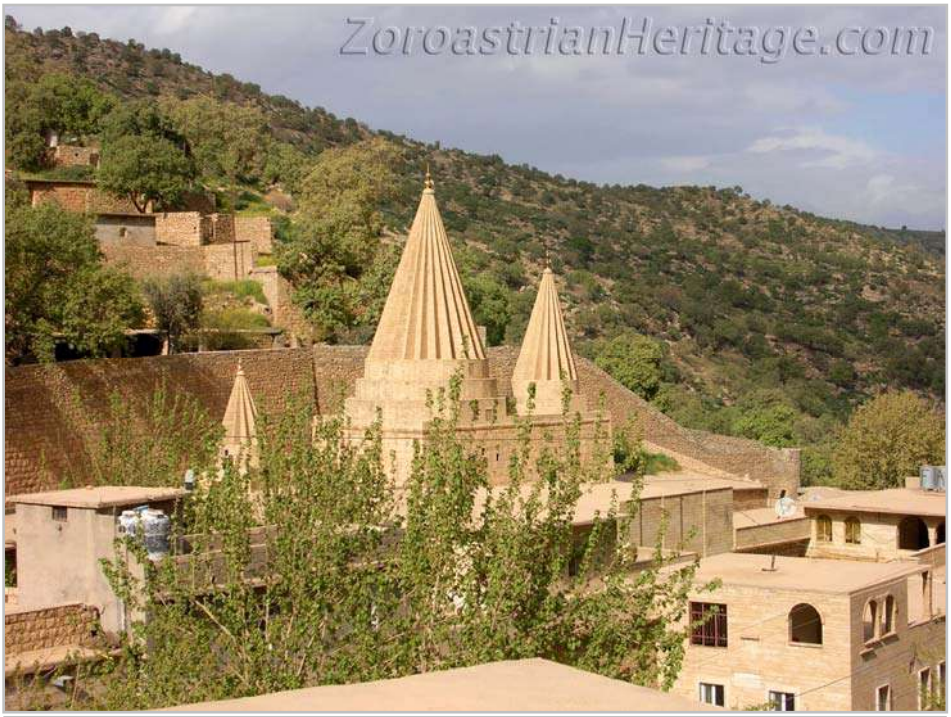


Figure c town and temple. Credit: http://kurdistanart.blogspot.ca.

Lalish, a small village located about fifty five km north-east of Mosul – in a mountain valley in Iraqi Kurdistan (northern Iraq) – is home to the holiest temple in the Yazidi faith and the tomb of Sheikh Adi, a 11th century religious leader, reformer and Sufi Master.

C. Yazidi Relationship to Other Religions

Besides having their own unique beliefs, the Yazidis have added in beliefs from other religions making theirs a blended religion (as was Roman Mithraism). Yazidism contains beliefs found in Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. However, we read that in a May 2014 article from Gaziantep, Turkey, a Yazidi leader Sheikh Kherto Haji Ismail denied that the Yazidi were linked to Zoroastrians. Indeed, some Yazidi beliefs and customs such as the annual bull sacrifice – like the bull killing in Roman Mithraism – are opposed to Zoroastrian beliefs. The Yazidi bull sacrifice is one of the two most important Yazidi observances. Incidentally, there is a cave like tunnel with a seating ledge under the Lalish temple.

D. Two Important Yazidi Festivals

The two most important Yazidi annual events held during the Feast of Seven Days held in early October are the Evening Dance and the Sacrifice of the Bull.

(i) Evening Dance

Assembling for the evening dance. Credit: Reuters.

During the October Feast of Seven Days, religious leaders perform the Evening Dance every evening just after sunset in the Lalish Sanctuary's courtyard. Two groups of seven men dressed in white, the colour of purity, dance or walk to the music of singers and musicians. Led by the Head Faqir who wears a black fur cape and a conical hat, they dance in a circle around a 'sacred flame' that represents both the Sun and God. The clothes of the Head Faqir are similar to those worn by Sheikh Adi. While alive, the Yazidi sheikhs were prophet-like leaders. After they died, they became god-like.

(ii) Sacrifice of the Bull

The Sacrifice of the Bull takes place on the festival's the last day. It marks the arrival of autumn and is accompanied by prayers for rain during the coming winter followed by a bountiful spring. When the gates of the sanctuary are thrown open, a bull held within races out and is chased by men of the Qaidy tribe. They herd and chase the bull through the city's street and then up a hill to the sanctuary of Sheikh Shams (compare this to the bull running festival in Spain and Portugal followed by the bulls' ritual killing). Here the bull is caught, slaughtered, its meat cooked and distributed amongst the gathered pilgrims as the feast of the solar Sheikh Shams.

E. Sheikh Shams – Lord of the Sun

Shams means the Sun in Arabic and as his name suggests, he is Lord of the Sun.

The Yazidis consider Sheikh Shams to be Sheikh Adi's vizier or prime minister as well as the essence of the Yazidi religion. Lines in Yazidi texts state, "My Sheikh Shams is Lord of the Disc (of the Sun)." "I testify the Sun has risen, the golden disc Sheikh Shams, head of God's council." At dawn, an observant and righteous Yazidi will kiss the spot on the ground where the first rays of the Sun fall. As Lord of the Sun, at time the words of reverence to him become a prayer to God the Creator as in, "Sheikh Shams you are compassionate, you are my creator; for all ills you are the remedy; to all creatures you are merciful." The soul of a deceased person crosses the Sirat Bridge (cf. Chinvat Bridge) and is judged by Sheikh Adi.

When the Yazidis pray to Sheikh Shams, they face the Sun.

The entrance to Lalish. Nallein Sowilo at http://peacock-angel.org captions this image "After death the soul crosses the Sirat Bridge and is judged by Sheikh Adi" perhaps suggesting the gate and lane represent the Sirat Bridge.

Given that the ritual Yazidi sacrificing of the bull takes place in the sanctuary of the solar Sheikh Shams (perhaps to invoke his blessings) and given that the ritual killing is supposed to have spiritual power in ensuring life sustaining rains and a bountiful spring, the Yazidi bull sacrifice and its spiritual implications give us some insights into the Roman Mithraic custom – interpreted by Prof. John Hinnells as a bull sacrifice that gives life to man.

F. Shared Bull Sacrifice Ritual & Roman Mithraic Sect's Origins

The shared ritual of a bull sacrifice between the Yazidis and Roman Mithraists has added interest to us because the Yazidis are located in a region that was once the frontiers of the Roman army's eastern campaigns. Since both Yazidism and Roman Mithraism are/were blended religions, both may have adopted the bull sacrifice practice from a common source – say, a dedicated Mithraic sect located in today's western Asian regions of Armenia, Turkey, Syria and Iraq.

5. Roman Contact with Asian-Aryan Mithraists

One of the earliest records of European (Greco-Roman) contact with Asian Mithraists is that of Greek biographer Plutarch (45-120 CE). Plutarch writes that Roman General Pompey (106-48 BCE) came in to contact with Asian Mithraists when he battled Cilician pirates from the west coast of Asia Minor. These pirates practiced Mithraic secret rites. This happened when the Parthians ruled Iran and coincidentally when a local (in what is Turkey and Armenia today) king's Europeanized name was Mithradates. Mithradates is the European version of the Zoroastrian name 'Meherdad' derived from the Old Persian 'Mithradata' meaning 'Mithra-given'.

Plutarch.

There are two Roman gold coins struck in the west Asian Pergamum/Pergamon mint dating to 19 BCE that show a winged female figure stabbing or cutting the throat of a bull in a pose almost identical to that in Roman

Gold coins of Roman Emperor commemorating the capture of Armenia by Octavianus/Augustus (27 BCE-14 CE) and minted at Pergamum in 19 BCE.

Mithraeums. Pergamum was a city close to Troy on the western coast of Asia Minor. It was once part of the Achaemenid Persian-Zoroastrian Empire (c.700-330 BCE) and later became part of the eastern Roman Empire. The coins show Roman Emperor Octavianus/Augustus (27 BCE-14 CE) on one side and the bull killing on the other side together with a surrounding legend "Armenia Capta" (Captured/Conquest). 'Capta' was used on commemorative Roman coins with the names of different nations overrun by the Romans, together with a symbol of that country. Why is that significant? The bull killing is being shown as a symbol of Armenia, which had been part of greater Aryana/Iran-shahr of and on, and which at that time was ruled by a family with Iranian-Parthian roots.

Out of the many Augustan coins minted across the Roman Empire, these commemorative coins are the only ones showing a Mithraic-like bull-killing scene. While the winged female figure (symbolizing Roman victory) has no resemblance to the later Roman images of Mithras, the bull-killing scene closely resembles the Roman Mithraic scenes minus the creatures gnawing at the bull.

6. When did Mithraism Reach Europe?

A. First Evidence of Mithraism in Roman Europe

Mithraic archeological sites abound throughout the lands of the old Roman Empire. The majority of Mithraic sites date to between the 2nd and 4th centuries CE and the earliest Mithraic artifacts discovered have been at sites that date to between 80 and 100 CE. Both Mithraism and Christianity appear to have their footholds in the Rome Empire around the same time – about two thousand years ago.

Among these artifacts are altar fragments found in a Roman legion site at Novae near Steklen in Bulgaria. The site was then part of Rome's lower Danube province of Moesia. The altar's inscriptions indicate it was dedicated by Philopalaestrus, a collector of import duties and public taxes – in a manner similar to other Mithraic altar dedications by senior Roman officials.

Mithraic altar fragments found at Novae near Steklen, Bulgaria. Note 'Persian'/Aryan clothing on the Mithraic associates on the left and right.
Image credit: D. Detschew in 'Antike Denkmaler aus Bulgarien' at *JOAI* (1939).

7. Was Roman Mithraism a Public Religion or a Masonry-like Private Society?

A. Mithraea – Mithraic Lodges

Modern scholars call the windowless cave-like lodges or temples where Roman Mithraists gathered, Mithraea.

Artist's concept of a 14-person Mithraeum scene.

Known Mithraea are usually around 10-12m long and 4-6m wide. Many are located in secluded and dark places – even underground. The open floor space is restricted and narrow with barely enough room for twenty people.

B. Masonic-Like Mystery & Secret Sect

Modern authors call Mithraism a mystery sect – because entry into a Mithraic temple or lodge was restricted to followers who had undergone an initiation rite. As a result, the public at large did not know much about the sect's beliefs, which were a mystery to the public.

There is a modern group called the Masons. The Masons are a secret group who meet in a windowless hall and perform rites. At one time, the Masons were a powerful and influential group whose members are rumoured to have been the fathers of the American state. Some Masonic websites state that since Roman Mithraism was a secret society like Masonry and since both share common rites such as initiation rites, Masonry, they say, likely descended from Roman Mithraism.

Given that Roman Mithraism operated more like a private and secret

society, it is highly unlikely that Roman Mithraism was a religion followed by a substantial part of the Roman population. We have not been able to find evidence of the claim by several authors that Mithraism was a widely practiced public or imperial religion. It is also unlikely that Roman Mithraists instituted large public festivals.

8. Roman sect of Dolichenus

Around the same time that Mithraism flourished in Rome, there existed a rival mystery sect devoted to another imported Asian god Dolichenus.

Slab dedicated to the Roman god Sol and the Syrian god Dolichenus. Sol is identified from other images as wearing a chlamys and emitting solar rays. The bearded god beside him is likely Dolichenus. Moon goddess Luna is shown between them. The slab does not show or mention Mithra. It was dedicated by a priest called Chresimus and was discovered at the barracks of the *Equites Singulares* at via Tasso, Rome. It is dated to between 150 and 200 CE. Image credit: Wikipedia.

A. Doliche, Turkey (Syriac) Sites

The name 'Dolichenus' may be derived from the name of a town Doliche in south-central Turkey. The town is not far from the Syrian border, where the ruins of temples were found on a hill nearby. In Roman times, this area was part of Syria.

Two side-by-side underground Mithraea have also been discovered in Doliche. The date of their construction is disputed. Some researchers argue for a date as early as the first century BCE. That would have been during the early Parthian era and from about the time of the founding of the Roman Empire. Others prefer a first century CE dating. The earlier date would make them two of the earliest Mithraea discovered so far.

B. Blended Religions

Since Dolichenus was originally a Syrian god, some authors call the

Roman Jupiter Dolichenus an 'oriental' god like Mithras. The pairing of the Roman god Sol with a Syrian god Dolichenus (together with the ever-present Roman goddess Luna), indicates the Dolichenus sect had blended beliefs like Mithraism.

C. Sol – a Shared God

The presence of the Roman Sun god, Sol, in the Dolichenus sect demonstrates that Sol was not the exclusive preserve of Mithraism. The inscribed dedication we just reviewed starts with "*Soli Invicto*" (Sun invincible) and we will discuss the use of this title later. Nobody has suggested – as authors constantly do with Mithraism – that Dolichenus was therefore a Sun god.

D. Sub-sects of the Popular Native Roman Religion

The presence of Roman deities Sol and Luna indicate that Romans who were part of Mithraic and Doliche sects or societies remained part of the popular native religion of Rome. They were not independent or breakaway groups. We read that that were at least four such sub-sects in Rome around the same time. As are many Masons members of larger popular religions, Mithraists were likely members of the larger popular religion as well.

E. Relative Size of Membership

So far, about thirty Mithraea – Roman Mithraic temples – and twenty Dolichenus temples have been discovered in the city of Rome. These numbers give us an idea about the two sects' membership proportions.

While there were a large number of Mithraea spread across the Roman Empire from east to west – over 500 have been discovered and many more will remain undiscovered – the membership of the sect was still relatively small compared to the Romans who followed their popular native pre-Christian religion. Out of a population that exceeded a million, some researchers estimate the number of Mithraists Rome city as between 20,000 to 25,000 or about 5% of Rome's male population.

Once again, a comparison with Masonry bears mention. Masonry has or had a large number of lodges in many countries. Despite the large combined population of these countries, Masonry had or has a relatively small membership.

PART II – MITHRA & THE SUN

1. Is Mithra the Sun? Was Mithra a Sun God?

A. The Problem

On the one hand, Roman images show Mithras and the Sun god Sol as entirely separate and different entities in ethnicity and function. On the other hand, some Mithraic inscriptions join their names as in "*Deo Soli invicto Mithrae*" (God Sun Invincible Mithra) leading many to assume that the first part, "God Sun Invincible" is merely a title for "Mithra".

On the one hand, the Zoroastrian scripture, the *Avesta*, has separate chapters devoted to the Sun and Mithra. In these chapters, the two names are used entirely separately and differently. On the other hand, the some later Middle Persian texts refer to the Sun as Mihr (a Middle Persian form of Mithra) leading many to assume Mithra is just another name for the Sun.

Is Mithra just another name for the Sun? We will begin our analysis with an examination of the Roman god, Sol, the Sun.

Mithra & the Sun god, Sol, are shown separately. 2nd-3rd cent. CE Roman Mithraic altar scene. The personified Sun, Sol (almost nude) is at the top-centre with Mithra in the top right-hand corner & Roman goddess Luna at the top-left. Three of the capped figures – Mithra, Cautopates & Cautes (Mithraic associates) are wearing 'Persian'/Aryan attire. Sol wears only a chlamys, a Greco-Roman mantle often shown on the Greek Sun god Helios. The four male figures hold barsom-like stick bundles. Roman Mithraic scenes show a syncretic blend of beliefs. This panel was discovered near Fiano Romano, near Rome, Italy in 1926 & is currently in the Louvre Museum, Paris, France. Image credit: Wikipedia.

2. Roman Worship of the Sun, Sol as God

A. Modern Myth

S. E. Hijmans in his thoroughly researched doctoral thesis states, "This remarkable idea that there had been two distinct Sun gods in Rome has been the dominant view in Classical scholarship for well over a century. Nonetheless, this is a modern myth for which there is quite simply no evidence. The evidence we do have suggests, either implicitly or explicitly, that the Romans had venerated Sol as a Roman god for as long as they could recall, and never ceased to do so until the demise of polytheism."

B. Sol, One of the Oldest Indigenous Roman Gods

Ancient Roman scholar and writer Marcus Terentius Varro (116-2 BCE) traces the worship of Sol in Rome back to the days of Titus Tatius, an eight-century BCE king who battled Romulus the founder of Rome. We also found an early Roman discussion on the ancient god Sol in a retort by Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE). Augustine, in response to allegations that Christianity had brought about the decline of Rome, wrote that the Romans worshipped Sol as a god from time of Titus Tatius. The implication here is that Romans worshipped Sol from the very outset of Roman history.

Roman Sol's counterpart, Greek Sun god Helios wearing only a chlamys, a Greco-Roman mantle, as he does in several Mithraic motifs, and an important identifier of his 'ethnicity'. Image credit: Wikipedia.

C. Sol Indiges

Other classical writers also mention the early Roman worship of the Sun god Sol as *Sol Indiges* – the indigenous or native Roman god Sol. In general, the '*Indiges*' were the old indigenous Roman gods while the '*Novensides*' where the new imported gods. The imports complimented but did not replace the native gods.

Two Roman coins depicting Sol before the introduction of Mithraism. Top: Sol on obverse; crescent, stars and orb on reverse. 217-15 BCE. Bottom: Helmeted Roma head on obverse; Sol wearing chiton and chlamys driving a quadriga (four-horsed) chariot on reverse. Minted by Marcus Aburius 132 BCE.

Hijmans provides a catalogue of source references and adds that the old sources unanimously treat Sol as one of the earliest gods in Rome.

Classical Roman writers Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE) and Quintilianus (c.35-c.100 CE) record that temples to the native and ancient Sol stood on the banks of the River Numicius and on Quirinal Hill in Rome.

Sol together with Helios, the older Greek god of the Sun, and Apollo, the later Greek god of Sun & light, were all part of the ancient Greco-Roman pantheon of gods.

D. Romans Worshipped Sol Long before Mithras

All in all, the oldest available source texts state that Sol was one of the earliest indigenous gods known to have been worshipped in Rome – from at least the eight century BCE and perhaps earlier – nearly a thousand years before the first evidence of the Roman Mithras.

E. Scholarly Bias

Why then have so many scholars sought to promote a contrary and contrived reality? Hijmans says it best. "To understand how that could be, there were some basic tendencies that have dominated research into Roman Sun cults. Earlier studies were heavily laden with prejudice. Many scholars felt uncomfortable with the concept of a Roman Sun cult and some were openly hostile towards it. This hostility was ideological in nature and had a strong influence on research."

3. Sol Invictus

Romans began to use the Latin title '*invictus*'/'*invicti*' (invincible) for many of their gods including Sol from about the 3rd century BCE.

The title '*invictus*' was also used for Roman emperors from the time of Emperor Commodus (180-192 CE) onwards.

Inscription dated to 158 CE showing invictus as a title for Sol, the Sun god, at Musei Capitolini, Rome, Italy.

4. Are Mithra & Sol the Same in Roman Mithraism?

A. Images Show Sol & Mithra Separately & Ethnically Different

Roman Mithraic altar scenes show Mithras and Sol separately. Sol and Luna are also consistently shown driving their own chariots. In some scenes, Mithras is shown mounting Sol's chariot behind Sol. Mithras is also consistently shown sacrificing the bull and then serving Sol its meat. Faithful to the original Avestan and Vedic meaning of his name, Mithra was Sol's friend and ally.

Sol and Mithras are also shown as being ethnically different. In the artistic system used by Greco-Romans, young Greco-Roman men are shown scantily clad or nude while 'Persians'/Aryans are usually shown fully clothed from head to foot in a manner the Romans understood as being 'Persian'. In Mithraic iconography, Mithra and his associates are shown fully clothed in a typical 'Persian'/Aryan style, while Sol is shown nude or with just a chlamys,

a mantle, around his neck, in the Greco-Roman style – Mithra was 'Persian' while Sol was Greco-Roman.

Mithra and Sol shown separately and bonded by a handshake.
White marble altar discovered at Ptuj, Slovenia, showing Persian clothed Mithras (at right) handing pieces of meat speared by a knife (as in a kabob) over an altar flame to the semi-nude Sol (at left) wearing a typical crown with rays of light and chlamys, a mantle. A raven pecks at the meat perhaps representing all meat-eating creatures. A club shaped piece of meat lies on the floor beside the altar. Between their two heads is an inscription: DSIM… initials for *Deo Solis Invicto Mithrae*. The gods are shown separately while their names are paired in the inscription.

B. Dual Mention of Gods e.g. Mithra Varuna

The dual mention of Sol and Mithras in inscriptions such as "God Sun Invincible Mithra" can be compared with the dual name Varuna Mithra and Indra Agni in Rig Vedic texts. They are partners yet separate gods. They are mentioned together but shown separately. This partnership between Sol and

Mithras only exists in Mithraic inscriptions. As stated by Hijmans, this partnership "cannot be extended to Sol in other, non-Mithraic contexts, because Mithras does not occur in non-Mithraic contexts…."

C. Mithra & Sol are Different

Since the title '*invictus*' (invincible) is frequently used for Sol, in the inscription 'God Sol Invincible Mithra' it is likely that the title 'invincible' is attached to Sol and not to Mithra. Just as 'Mitra Varuna' should read 'Mitra & Varuna', 'God Sol Invincible Mithra' should read 'God Sol Invincible & Mithra'.

We not found any evidence to suggest that we can automatically equate Sol and Mithra. Mithra is not the Sun. The Sun is not Mithra. In Roman Mithraism, Mithra is a friend and ally of the Sun.

5. Is the Aryan Mithra the Same as the Sun?

A. Sun & Mithra have Separate Dedicated Chapters in the *Avesta*

The Zoroastrian *Avesta*'s book of *Yasht*s, the Radiant Sun (Khorsheed) and Mithra (Meher) have dedicated and separate chapters. The chapter's verses treat the two entirely separately and describe them and their domains separately. This indicates the concepts behind them are entirely different.

B. Mithra – the Bond of Friendship between the Sun & Moon

In a rare mention of Mithra, the Khorsheed (radiant Sun) Yasht makes an insightful statement in verse five on the role of Mithra as the bond of friendship/companionship between the Sun and the Moon.

C. Mithra is Conflated with the Sun in Later Times

James Darmesteter in his translation of the Meher Yasht notes that in the *Avesta*, "Mithra is closely connected with the Sun, but not yet identical with it, as Mithra became in later times."

What we see is that while in early times Mithra was mentioned separately from the Sun, by medieval times Mihr (the name Mithra's later Middle Persian version) was often meant the Sun.

D. Mitra & the Sun in the Rig Veda Hindu Scriptures

If we are to look for proof to determine if Mithra and the Sun are the same or different in ancient Aryan theology, a good place to look is the oldest sacred Hindu text, the *Rig Veda*. The *Rig Veda* mentions Mitra (Mithra) at least 412 times – but only in a couple or so occasions in the same verse as the Sun, *Surya*. In a chapter dedicated to the Sun, Surya (chapter 50), we find no mention of Mitra at all. Importantly, the *Rig Veda* states, "Indra raised the Sun, Surya, on high in heavens that he may see afar". Similarly, "In the sky's lap the Sun, Surya, assumed its form so that Varuna and Mitra may behold

it."

Therefore, in the *Veda*s, the Sun clearly stands separately – physically and conceptually – from Mitra. Mitra means 'friend' and 'ally' and not the 'Sun' in Sanskrit.

E. Conclusions

Is Mithra the Sun? Was Mithra a Sun God? In both the Zoroastrian and Hindu scriptures, the *Avesta* and *Rig Veda*, Mithra and the Sun are entirely different.

PART III – ZOROASTRIAN CALENDAR

1. Overview

A. Texts Describing the Organization of the Zoroastrian Calendar

The calendars in use by Zoroastrians today are fundamentally identical. What makes them different is the manner of intercalary adjustment.[1] The organization of the orthodox Zoroastrian calendar is outlined in the Middle Persian texts, the *Bundahishn*s and the *Dinkard*.

B. Year & Month Lengths

The Zoroastrian calendar has a solar year of 365 days. The year is divided into twelve months (called *Mah* meaning Moon). The months were originally lunar-based but are now standardized months of 30 days each. Five intercalary days called Gatha days are added after the last month to make a total of 365 days in a solar year.

C. Intercalary Days & Gahambars

The five intercalary Gatha days also mark the year's last Gahambar. Gahambars are days of communal sharing and feasting. Six five-day long Gahambars are spread throughout the year and they are the only festivals mentioned in the scriptures, the *Avesta*, and can therefore be considered as scripturally mandated and obligatory festivals.

D. Days & Months Named not Numbered

The Zoroastrian calendar's months & days are named and not numbered.

E. Name Day Celebrations

The Zoroastrian calendar marks – and Zoroastrians celebrate – the days when the names of the day and month are the same. These auspicious days are celebrated as Jashns/Jashans or festivals, feasts and days of thanksgiving.

F. Preciseness of the Zoroastrian Calendar

The Zoroastrian Fasli (seasonal) calendar is one of the most precise and consistent calendars used in the world today. A month always starts with the first day of the week and a month does not contain fractional weeks. One, 365-day calendar grid can be used perpetually. The calendar can also serve as a zodiac and seasonal calendar in temperate regions.[2]

The Fasli calendar was based on the system outlined in the *Bundahishn*s and the *Dinkard* and proposed by Bombay priest, Khurshedji Cama. Kai

[1] See http://www.heritageinstitute.com/zoroastrianism/calendar/index.htm#differences.
[2] For further details on the Zoroastrian calendar, see http://www.heritageinstitute.com/zoroastrianism/calendar/index.htm.

Khosrow Shahrokh of Iran adopted the Fasli calendar and called it the Bastani calendar in Iran.

2. Month Length & Sidereal Degrees

The fundamental choice made by the original designers of the Zoroastrian calendar was to keep the month length constant at thirty days as the next whole number based on the cycle of the moon from New Moon to New Moon (29.3 days on average). Since each month is also represented by a constellation of stars that together form the zodiac, each constellation house is 30 degrees in size with each day representing a one-degree movement of the Sun within each constellation at sunrise.

3. Spring Equinox – Hamaspathmaedya

The *Bundahishn*s and the *Dinkard* stipulate that the Zoroastrian year shall start on the first day after the Hamaspathmaedya. Hamas-path-maedhya, means 'mid-path-of all', meaning the spring equinox. It marks the end of winter. Given the varying lengths of the solar year, allowance is made of the spring equinox to fall with the five days of the Hamaspathmaedya Gahambar though preferably in the last two days.

4. Nowruz – New Year's Day

The first day of the New Year, Nowruz meaning New Day, is the first full day after the spring equinox. The Zoroastrian day starts at dawn. In the Zoroastrian Fasli calendar synchronized with the Gregorian calendar, Nowruz falls on March 21.

5. Other Solstices & Autumn Equinox

Other than marking the spring equinox on the Hamaspathmaedya, the Zoroastrian calendar does not mark or celebrate any of the other solstices or the autumn equinox. In particular, it does not mark or celebrate the passing of the winter solstice. This feature is critical in understanding our response to the various claims we are seeking to examine.

We will now examine the claim that prior to its designation as Christmas, Romans celebrated the nativity of Mithra on December 25th, the day of the winter solstice in Rome around 300 CE.

PART IV – CHRISTMAS DAY & MITHRAISM

1. Jesus' Birth Date & Christmas

A. Early Attempt to Determine Jesus' Birth Date

One of the earliest records about the attempt to determine Jesus' birth date is the 2nd century CE account of Christian theologian, Clement of Alexandria (150-215 CE). Clement wrote that various authors placed Jesus' birthday at March 21, April 15, April 19 or 20, May 20, November 18 and January 6.

December 25 was not among the dates listed by Clement.

Early Christian theologian Clement of Alexandria.

B. Christianity Establishes Itself in Rome

By the fourth century CE, Christianity had begun to establish itself as the dominant religion of Rome under Emperor Constantine (r.306-337 CE). Soon thereafter, the Church of Rome instituted the date for celebrating the birth date of Jesus.

C. December 25 Chosen as Jesus' Birth Date

After a debate within the Christian community, the *Catholic Encyclopedia* states that Pope Julius I (who served from 337 to 352 CE), officially chose December 25 of the Julian calendar as the birthday of Jesus around 350 CE.

D. Opposition to December 25 as Jesus' Birth Date

About a hundred years later, Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis, Cyprus, campaigned against the choice of December 25 as the date of Jesus' birth. He preferred January 6 as the date of Jesus' birth because "Greeks – I mean idolaters – celebrate a festival which Romans call Saturnalia on December 25 ...which is a solstice. The day begins to lengthen because light increases."

This is one of the clearest statements by a Christian leader that December 25 was originally the date of a 'heathen' festival connected to the winter solstice and that consequently, Jesus' birthday should not be celebrated on that date. However, the 'heathen' festival mentioned is Saturnalia and not the nativity of Mithra. [More precisely, the Saturnalia festivities started on December 17 and likely continued to or past December 25, then the date of the winter solstice – or the day after.]

[Nowadays the first sunrise following the winter solstice occurs usually (depending on the year) between December 21 to 23 of the Gregorian calendar instituted by Pope Gregory XIII on March 1, 1582. Before that date, Romans used the Julian calendar, which by the 4th to 6th century CE was a

few days out of phase with the actual occurrence of the solstice.]

2. Roman Festival of Saturnalia

The festival of Saturnalia was dedicated to Saturn, Roman god of the harvest. By all accounts, Saturnalia was a raucous festival. In reality, Rome's festive season started on November 24 with the festival of Bruma.

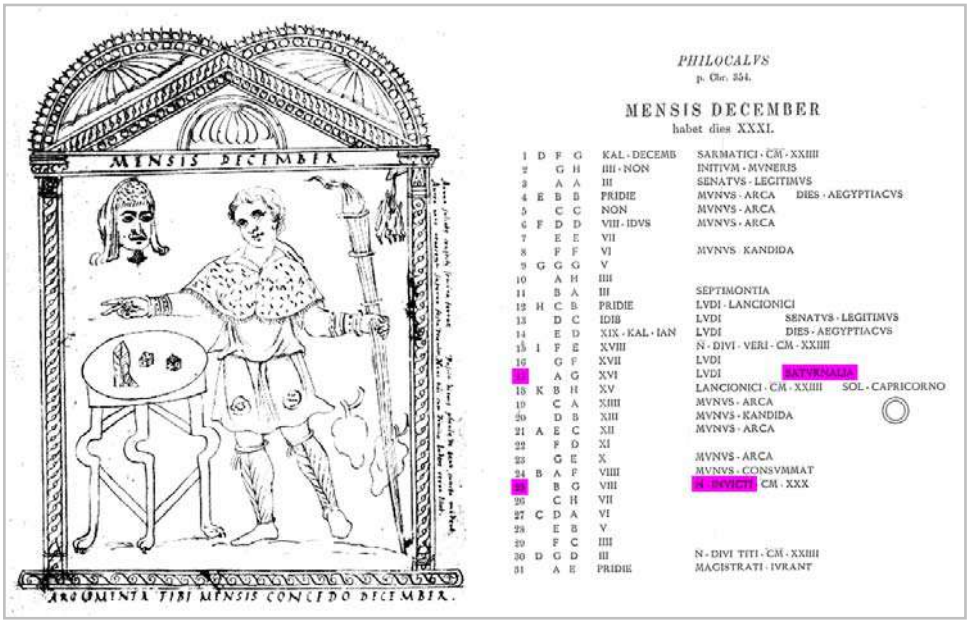
Saturnalia by Antoine-François Callet (1782-3 CE). Image credit: Wikipedia.

Fifth century CE Byzantine writer Joannes the Lydian says it best – that the cold season in Europe (starting in November) brought a stop to the work of farmers, hunters and soldiers. Now idle from work, they occupied themselves… well, partying.

3. Natalis Invicti

A. *Chronography of 354*. N. Invicti

A Roman calendar of events and festivals later titled the *Chronography of 354* and written and copied by Christians, notes that Saturnalia was followed by a festival on December 25 called "N. Invicti". N. Invicti is likely short for Natalis Invicti meaning the 'nativity or birth of the invincible'. The *Chronography of 354* does not explain this festival. Since '*invicti*' was a common title afforded to Roman gods and emperors, Natalis Invicti is not a definitive festival name in itself.



Chronography of 354's folio on December. Note the man throwing dice indicating the gambling was part of the December festivities.

No other source talks about a festival called Natalis Invicti.

The original text does not survive and what we have is a 17th century CE copy. Given that the author and copyist of the *Chronography of 354* were Christians – and since Jesus' birth-date is listed in another section on December 25th – Natalis Invicti could even have referred to Jesus' birth.

This entry in the *Chronography of 354* begs the question: the birthday of the invincible who?

B. The Claim & Problem

Some claim that Natalis Invicti celebrated the nativity (birth) of Mithra. Others deny the claim, stating it celebrate the birth of Jesus. Who is right? Since no other source lists or names such a festival, can both be wrong? Two early Christian leaders provide us with a possible answer.

3. Christian Accounts of 'Heathen' Celebrations on December 25

A. Tertullian's Account

Tertullian (160-220 CE), a Christian author, was a North African Berber from Carthage (Tunis, Tunisia today), a port city reputedly founded by the Asian Phoenicians. Tertullian warned Christians not to partake in Saturnalia's festivities or to exchange gifts on New Year's Day or Midwinter's day since "every pomp of the devil is frequented" and "games join their noise or else banquets join their din!"

The problem Tertullian had with Christians continuing to celebrate heathen festivals continued for over two hundred years as we read in a harsh criticism by Pope Leo I.

B. Pope Leo I's Homilies

The 45th Christian Pope, Leo I (c.400-461 CE) was compelled to scold the Christians of Rome repeatedly in his homilies (religious lectures), admonishing them not to pay homage to the Sun on the very doorsteps of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. He said, "From such a [heathen] system of teaching proceeds the ungodly practice of certain foolish folk who worship the Sun as it rises at the beginning of daylight from elevated positions. Some Christians even think it is so proper to do this before entering the blessed Apostle Peter's Basilica. …When they mount the steps, they turn around and bow towards the rising sun and with bent neck do homage to its brilliant orb."

Pope Leo I confronts Attila the Hun. Altar at St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican, Rome.

In a homily regarding December 25, Leo I sought to banish from people's minds the notion that Christmas also honoured "the rising of the new Sun". In his homily he said, "Dearly beloved …simpler souls are mislead with the pestilent notion that our solemn feast day [Christmas] seems to derive its honour not so much from the nativity of Christ as from the rising of the

new Sun. …Let not Christian souls entertain any such wicked superstition and portentous lie."

What we learn from Pope Leo I's admonitions is that Romans continued to celebrate December 25 as the "rising of the new Sun". Nowhere does he mention a celebration of the nativity of Mithra on December 25.

C. Could December 25 Celebrate Natalis Solis Invicti?

Pope Leo I's comment "rising of the new Sun" on December 25 could mean either 'birth of the new Sun' or 'rise of the new Sun after the solstice.' The possibility that it meant 'birth of the new Sun' is given a boost by an oft-quoted annotation by a copyist of a manuscript authored by a 12th century CE Syrian bishop Dionysius bar Salibi. The annotation's translation reads, "It was a custom of the Pagans to celebrate on the same 25 December the birthday of the Sun, at which they kindled lights in token of festivity. In these solemnities and revelries, the Christians also took part. Accordingly when the doctors of the Church perceived that the Christians had a leaning to this festival, they took counsel and resolved that the true Nativity should be solemnised on that day." We have not been able to check the original text of this annotation made by a copyist and, which not part of the original text.

Decadence (1847) by Thomas Couture (1815-79). A possible Saturnalia feasting scene.

4. Summary of Findings

The definitive date of Jesus' birth is not known. Pope Julius I chose December 25 as Jesus' birth date from a variety of possible dates.

The 45th Christian Pope, Leo I, stated that some of his parishioners still honoured a 'heathen' (pre-Christian) event that marked the "rising of the new Sun" on December 25.

The only 'heathen' festival on December 25 named and condemned by early Christian fathers is the celebration of Saturnalia that occurred around the same time.

We have not found mention in an original Latin source, that December 25 celebrated the birth of the god Mithra.

PART V – MEHERGAN, AUTUMNAL FESTIVAL

1. Zoroastrian Calendar's Mehergan Devoted to Mithra

The only major Zoroastrian festival dedicated to Mithra/Meher is Mehergan (Meher-day; perhaps Mithragan in ancient times), a name-day jashn celebrated on Meher month's Meher day. Using the Fasli calendar, Mehergan falls on October 2 and not fall on the autumn equinox. There is about a ten-day difference between the two.

2. Mehergan According to Biruni

A. Historical & Regional Context to Biruni's Information

Biruni (973-1048 CE), an eastern Iranian historian from Khwarezm (Uzbekistan today) who wrote in Arabic, provides us with some insights into Zoroastrian-Persian festivals celebrated during the tenth and eleventh centuries CE – about the same time that the great poet Ferdowsi lived.

Medieval Iranian historian Biruni.

B. Mihr (Mithra) As another Name for the Sun

The time when Biruni copiously gathered his information was also the time when Mithra's medieval name 'Mihr' had become another name for the Sun.

C. Significance of 'Mihragan'. Mihr as Sun

In a chapter of his book *Athar* titled 'On the Festivals in the Months of the Persians' Biruni states, "Mihr is the name of the Sun (see above) who is said to have appeared to the world on this day. Therefore this day was called Mihr." If Biruni means that God created the Sun on Mehergan, this does not agree with Zoroastrian texts, which state the event occurred at the beginning of the year. The erroneous conflation of Mihr/Mithra with the Sun may be one cause for this error.

The Avestan term '*khvar-khshaeta*' (New Persian Khor-sheed) means 'sun-radiant' or 'radiant Sun'. New Persian uses 'Khorsheed' to mean 'Sun' and not 'Meher'. Instead, 'Meherbani' means kindness, even affection or love.

Biruni's following statement is also not consistent with Zoroastrian texts.

D. Mihr as Light

Biruni continues, "On the same day, God is said to have illuminated [the Moon] with light, for previously God had created the Moon as a black ball without any light. Therefore, they say on Mihragan, the Moon stands higher than the Sun…. Eranshahri says: God made a treaty between light and darkness on Nowruz and Mihragan." In some ways, Biruni is offering us a

commentary on the older Avestan explanation, where Mithra is not the Sun, but rather the bond (like a hamazor clasp?) between the Sun and the Moon.

The *Avesta* does not explain the nature of this bond. Some authors feel the bond is light and therefore translate 'Meher' as 'light' even though the *Avesta* does not support such an interpretation. Avestan '*raya*' and '*roacha'* (New & Middle Persian Roshan) mean 'light', 'lit up' and 'brightness'. The *Bundahishn*s start by saying that Ahura Mazda dwells in '*Roshnih*' and '*Asar Roshnih*' meaning 'light' and 'endless light' and that out of '*Styi Roshnih*', meaning 'essence of light', Ahura Mazda caused creation to manifest.

Further along Biruni adds that Persians (Zoroastrians) detest the full Moon because it draws the Sun's light leaving people spiritually vulnerable.

E. No Mention of a Winter Solstice Festival

Most importantly, Biruni does not mention the existence of a Zoroastrian winter solstice festival.

PART VI – YALDA, OTHER WINTER SOLSTICE CELEBRATIONS & A SUGGESTION

1. No Zoroastrian Winter Solstice Celebration

Biruni does not mention any Zoroastrian ('Persian') celebration marking the passage of the winter solstice either in his chapter on Persian (Zoroastrian) festivals or in his chapters on the festivals of (Zoroastrian) Sogdians (from Bukhara-Sugd) and the (Zoroastrian) Khwarezmians.

2. Greek Calendar's Winter Solstice Celebration

The one mention of a winter solstice celebration Biruni makes, is in his chapter 'On the Days of the Greek Calendar'. [We found a winter solstice celebration during Poseidon month in a 3rd-4th century BCE Greek Athenian calendar that was celebrated in a wild manner like the Roman festival of Saturnalia.]

Once again, there is nothing to suggest the Greeks who celebrated the passing of the winter solstice were Mithraists. To this point, we have found no direct evidence that a group called 'Mithraists' celebrated the winter solstice anciently.

3. Assyrian Christian Worship during the Winter Solstice

Biruni notes that a Christian writer from Anbar (previously in Assyria and now in present-day Iraq?) stated that the rising-place of the Sun at the time of the winter solstice is the true east and the very midst of paradise. Further, (religious) 'law' ordered Christians to turn in praying towards the east (i.e. the rising place of the Sun). This is a remarkable statement that an eastern Christian law required a special worship on the winter solstice.

This is contrary to Roman Pope Leo I's (c.400-461 CE) earlier statements condemning the practice of facing east to honour the Sun as 'heathen'.

4. The Shamsi – People of the Sun

Biruni also introduces us to the Shamsiyya sect. 'Shamsiyya' is an Arabic word for 'People of the Sun'. More recently, they were called Shamsi or Shemsi for short. Researcher R. Donef states that the Shamsi would have existed all over the northern Tigris-Euphrates including what is now SE Turkey i.e., in and around the greater Kurdish regions.

The Shamsi were, as their name suggests, Sun-worshippers. Nowhere are they called Mithraists. Very little is known about them. Biruni's third-hand information states that some Magi officiated over them.

Researcher Lokman Turgut states, "The traces of a Sun cult (are) found all

over Kurdistan." He finds these traces embedded in the practices of the Kurdish Alevis and Sunnis. Once again, nowhere are these Sun cults called Mithraists.

Seventeenth to nineteenth century travellers report seeing Shamsis in Mardin and Diyarbakir (now in SE Turkey) and that Diyarbakir's "Ulu Cami mosque, which is known as the first mosque in Anatolia, was once a sun-worshipper-temple…." Further, the Turkish Government may have destroyed the last remains of a Shamsi temple when widening a road to Mardin near Diyarbakir. Turgut cites 18th century traveller Carsten Niebuhr as stating, "Niebuhr's Christian informants assured him that Shemsis always build their houses with the main entrance facing the sunrise and that they turn their face to the sun when they pray."

Researcher R. Donef states that the Shamsiyya "seemed to have been absorbed by the Syriac [Christian] Orthodox Assyrians in Mardin." Turgut suggests that some Shamsi called themselves Jacobites to escape Islamic persecution. This is one possible way that a sect (or sub-sect) of Syrian Christians adopted the practice of celebrating the winter solstice.

A. Sun Temple under Deyrul Zaferan Christian Monastery

Author Erol Sever states that the Christian Deyrul Zaferan monastery six km east of Mardin was built on top of a sun temple in the fifth century and the author of the Turkish Martine historical tour site claims that the monastery had been in existence since 2,000 BCE. The site also states, "A now-blocked window in the eastern wall enabled the worshippers to watch the sunrise while a niche on the southern wall served as an altar. There is a

Underground hall at the Deyrul Zaferan monastery 6 km east of Mardin (now in Kurdish Turkey) used by "Sun worshippers" at http://www.guide-martine.com.

noteworthy ceiling made of self-supporting stones built without the use of mortar. The monastery was enlarged over the centuries." Sever also notes that, the underground hall of the monastery is visited by Yazidis on certain days of the year. Several Christian churches in the area have Sun symbols engraved on their walls.

B. Mor Gabriel Christian Monastery

About east of Mardin, in the town of Turbadin near Midyat, older parts of the 1,600 year old Mor Gabriel monastery have a most unusual design. It too has self-supporting ceilings and wall openings through which the Sun pours in. [The monastery has been confiscated by the Turkish Government who

Unusually constructed hall in the monastery of Mor Gabriel,

calls the Assyrian Christians "occupiers". If anyone is an occupier, it is the Central Asian Turkish invader.]

All of this strengthens the possibility that several Sun cults existed in the northern Tigris-Euphrates and Armenia region – one of which might have been Mithraic – and from whom the occupying Roman armies picked up Mithraic beliefs. This information also supports the contention that it was through the Syrian Christian route that Yalda, a festival celebrating the passing of the winter solstice, entered Iran. The word 'Yalda' is said to be of Syrian Christian origin.

5. Yalda

Biruni makes no mention of a festival called 'Yalda'. For such an explanation, we must look in modern sources. 'Yalda' is not known to be an Iranian name.

A. Modern Iranian Reports on Yalda

Anna Krasnowolska in her *Encyclopaedia Iranica* article 'Sada Festival' notes, "In Islamic Persia, the night of the winter solstice (the last night of autumn) was known under its Syriac name of Shab-e Yalda (the night of nativity), or as Shab-e Chella (the night opening the initial forty-day period of the three-month winter)." Massoume Price in an article at CAIS also states, "Yalda is a Syriac word meaning birth…. It is not clear when and how the word 'Yalda' entered to the Persian language." She further states that the Christians who settled in Iran during the Sasanid era "reintroduced" the festival. Krasnowolska continues, "Being the longest and the darkest night of the year, additionally connected with Christianity, Shab-e Yalda usually has negative connotations in Persian poetry."

Yalda spread featuring pomegranates. Source Persianmama.com/

We can understand the negative connotations since in Zoroastrianism it would be an abhorrent to celebrate the longest night. Rather it is its passing, i.e. the next morning – the first or 'new' morning after the longest night – that may be argued as the occasion for celebration.

The earliest Iranian reports on the observance of Yalda appear to be verses by the Sufi poet Sa'adi Shirazi (1193-1291 CE).

B. Modern Iranian Reports on Yalda

Turning to present-day reports, the online unreferenced claim by Farsinet & Pars Times is that on the night of Jashne Yalda/Zayesh-e Meher, ancient Aryans would gather in Alborz mountain caves. These celebrants called '*yar-e ghar*', meaning friends of the cave, gathered and maintained a vigil to bear witness to the first rays of the rising Sun at daybreak the next morning (the start of the Zoroastrian Havan Gah). Further, on the previous night, communal fires were kept burning throughout the night. Unfortunately, neither publication cites a credible old source for their information.

5. Conclusions – Our Historical Search

Despite our best efforts searching old records, we have not found mention in of a traditional mainline Zoroastrian festival named 'Yalda', 'Zayesh-e Mehr' (meaning 'Birth of Mithra') or one that marked the passing of the winter solstice. We must therefore conclude that Yalda – a popular

festival in Islamic Iran – has never been an orthodox Zoroastrian festival.

We have also not found any information that an ancient group of Mithra worshippers celebrated the passing of the winter solstice as the birth of the god Mithra – or that Yalda celebrated the birth of Mithra. Instead, what we have found is that Romans and Greeks – who worshipped their native non-Mithraic gods including Sun gods Sol and Helios and many others – celebrated the passing of the winter solstice. For a while, this practice continued even after Romans had converted to Christianity.

7. The Conundrum & a Suggestion

A. The Desire to have a Joyous Zoroastrian Winter Celebration

While we have not been able to find mention of a Zoroastrian festival celebrating the passing of the winter solstice in Zoroastrian or Middle Persian texts, we can understand the desire amongst some Zoroastrian families to have a celebration of their own at a time when families of other traditions are joyously celebrating the season.

In doing so, we need to take care that we do not inadvertently undermine fundamental Zoroastrian values. Unintended as it might be, naming the event as a celebration of the 'birth of Mithra' (Zayesh-e Meher) may infer an association between the festival and a contrived Mithraism with its attendant belief in the birth of an anthropomorphic god from a rock – a belief antithetical to orthodox Zoroastrianism.

Can we instead make use of existing Zoroastrian festivals?

B. Zoroastrian Festivals of Mehergan & Daegan-Adar

December 23 is the auspicious day of Daegan-Adar on the Orthodox Vehizaki (Fasli) calendar's Dae-pa-Adar day, Dae month. The Zoroastrian calendar treats the month of Dae in a special way – it has four auspicious Daegan days of which both the December 16 Daegan and the December 23 Daegan-Adar are three-quarter year festivals honouring Ahura Mazda as Creator and Ahura Mazda's creation.

Those who follow the Shenshai calendar for religious purposes, the Gregorian calendar for secular purposes, and who celebrate Jamsheedi Nowruz on March 21, are in practice following three calendars. If so, in addition to celebrating Jamsheedi Nowruz, they can just add Vehizaki Daegan-Adar on December 23.

C. Maidyarem Gahambar

Maidyarem means mid-winter and the Maidyarem Gahambar is celebrated from December 31 to January 4. Gahambars are scripturally mandated and obligatory holidays of sharing and they fall on right over the Gregorian New Year's eve and day. Fortuitously, the period starting on

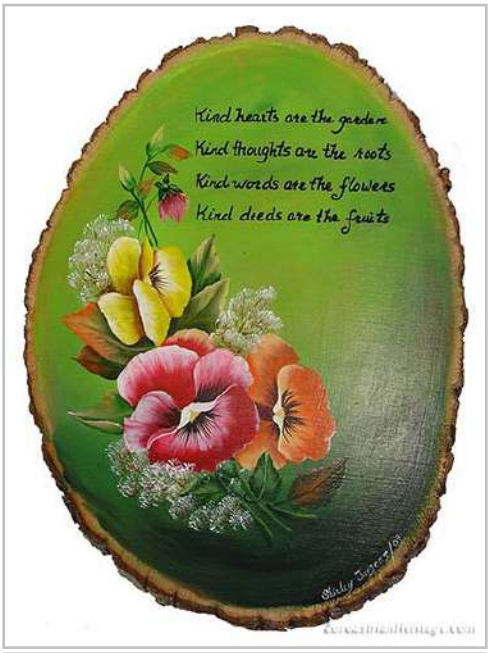
December 23 (Daegan-Adar) to January 4 (Maidyarem Gahambars last day) spans the entire Gregorian Christmas to New Year's festive season. Given these existing Zoroastrian festivals, there is hardly any point in inventing and adding yet another festival to the Zoroastrian calendar.

D. Our Suggestion

Our suggestion is that a 'Jashne Meher' be added to the December 23 Daegan-Adar. In the same manner as Nowruz celebrates renewal just after the spring equinox, the Hamaspathmaedya, Daegan-Adar falling just after the winter solstice can celebrate the triumph of light over darkness.

Rather than celebrating the birth of a 'god', Jashne Meher can celebrate light and a renewed avowal to abide by the values of which Meher Izad is a guardian – being honest and truthful, keeping one's word and promises, true friendship and being Meheraban – being kind, loving and peaceful.

Keeping one's word, being honest and truthful while being helpful are amongst the highest values to which Zoroastrians pledge themselves in their prayers. It behoves us to remember and renew that commitment constantly.



Being Meheraban.
Poetry by John Ruskin. Art by Shirley Jergens.

PART VII – GLOSSARY

Achaemenian - See Achaemenid.

Achaemenid - The dynasty of Persian kings who became the king-of-kings, the overlords, of Aryana and then established the largest empire the world had known until then, the Persian Empire. The Achaemenids ruled Persia from sometime in the 7th century BCE to the 4th century BCE when they were defeated and overthrown by Alexander. The dynasty is named after its founder Achaemenes – a Greek-based westernized version of his actual name Hakhamanishiya. The dynasty is more authentically called Hakhmanish.

Ahriman - The devil incarnate (for the purposes of these texts). Otherwise, the devil or an evil person.

Ahura Mazda - God in the language of the Zoroastrian scriptures, the *Avesta*. The two words are used together or individually. Over the centuries, the name evolved to Ahurmazd, Hormozd and eventually Ormozd. Also see Khoda.

Aryana - Ancient Iran. Also spelt Airyana or Ariana.

Aryan - Person/people from Aryana. Person claiming Aryan descent. Also spelt Arian.

atash - Fire.

Avesta - Zoroastrian scriptures. At one time, the *Avesta* consisted of 21 nasks or books dealing with philosophy, theology, rituals, prayers, hygiene, medicine and the medicinal properties of a thousand plants and herbs, history, astronomy, geography and other forms of knowledge. Today only five books and some fragments survive.

Avestan - Language of the *Avesta*, the Zoroastrian scriptures. The language consists of dialects, the oldest being the language of the Gathas, the hymns of Zarathushtra. Also the script used in the *Avesta*.

Bundahishn - A Middle Persian (Pahlavi) Zoroastrian text based on older works that discusses creation, geography, history, astrology and mythology. It is also called the Zand-Akash meaning knowledge of the Zand (see below). The surviving *Bundahishn* texts are frequently referred as the *Greater Bundahishn* (based on the older 16th century compilation) and the *Lesser Bundahishn* (based on a later 18th century compilation).

Denkard/Dinkart/Dinkard - A 9th century CE text written by Zoroastrian priests after the Arab invasion of Aryana. The name means 'Acts of Religion'.

div/deev/dev - Evil incarnations, individuals and demons. Devils.

Farsi - The Arabic version of Parsi (see below).

Ferdowsi - 10th-11th century Persian poet who wrote a shah-nameh (chronicle of kings, the popular history of Aryana) today called the *Shahnameh*.

gav - Bovine, beast of burden. Also life (cf. jiv/jun in modern Hindi/Persian).

gaya - Life. Related to jaya/gav/jivya, modern jiv meaning life.

Gaya Maretan - Mortal life (gaya = life, mare-tan = mortal/body which can die).

geush - Kine/bovine, earthly life, creation.

Geush Urvan - Soul of the kine/bovine, earthly life, creation.

gospand - (Called gosfand in Farsi). Beneficent animals. This author proposes that Middle Persian '*gospand*' is derived from the Avestan 'gao-spenta' – 'gao' meaning 'cow', and 'spenta' meaning 'beneficent' in this context. While in New Persian 'gosfand' means 'sheep', in the Middle Persian context of our references, '*gospand*' appears to mean all useful/beneficent animals that could be domesticated as livestock – those that provided food as milk and cheese, fiber, transportation, labour as beasts of burden and for tilling, threshing and other such tasks. The category may have included fowl as well.

[*The New Persian replacement of 'p' with an 'f' in '*gospand*' is likely part of the Arabization of the Persian language as in the transformation of 'Parsi' to 'Farsi'.]

Greater Bundahishn - See *Bundahishn*.

Hind/Hindu - Ancient India in Zoroastrian-Aryan texts. More precisely, the Indus River and the lands surrounding the Indus River, namely present-day Pakistan and Punjab. The name 'India' is derived from Hind i.e. Ind. Ironically, today's Pakistan has better claim to the modern name India than does India. The Vedic equivalents of Hind and Hindu are Sindh and Sindhu respectively.

Hormozd - Evolved version of Ahura Mazda (see Ahura Mazda).

Iran - Modern nation and name derived from Airan and Airyana (Aryana).

Lesser Bundahishn - See *Bundahishn*.

Magus/Magi - Magi, and its singular Magus, are Greek-based Western terms for Aryan-Zoroastrian priests, the maga, more recently known as the mobeds.

Mazda - Zoroastrian word for God. See Ahura Mazda and Khoda.

Middle Persian - The Persian-Aryan language as it emerged after the end of Macedonian rule in the 2nd century BCE, first as Parthian and then from the third to the 7th centuries CE, as Sasanian. There are therefore three versions of Middle Persian: Parthian, early Sasanian and late Sasanian. While some authors make distinctions between the three versions, others use this terms Middle Persian and Pahlavi to include all three. Evolving Eastern Aryan dialects such as Sogdian, Khwarezmian and Saka/Khotanese were also current during this time. Arabic writers used the names *Farisiya* (Farsi/Arabic for Persian) and *Fahlawiya* (Pahlavi) to mean all the Middle Persian dialects. Since Middle Persian was commonly written using the Parthian or Pahlavi script, it is also called

		Pahlavi (see below).
Mithra	-	Friend, friendship, bond, loyalty. Also in Zoroastrianism, the guardian angel of these qualities and related virtues, and a pre-Zoroastrian Aryan deity or god Mitra as found in the Hindu scriptures, the *Rig Veda*. Also a woman's name in Iran. Mithra is the Avestan / Old Iranian form of the name.
Mithras	-	The Romanized form of the name Mithra.
Mithraeum	-	A Roman temple devoted to Mithras.
Mitra	-	The Sanskrit and Old Persian form of the name Mithra.
Mobed	-	Zoroastrian hereditary priest called maga in the more ancient language of the *Avesta*. They were called magoi by the Greek. Magus (singular) and Magi (plural) are Latin derivatives.
nameh	-	Persian word meaning account, chronicles, letters, book. Derived from the Middle Persian (also called Pahlavi) word namak or namag. Also spelt nama.
New Persian	-	Modern Persian language as revived by the poet Ferdowsi, properly called Parsi though currently called Farsi, the Arabic version of the name. Also see Persian.
Old Persian	-	Language of the Achaemenid Persia era (700-300 BCE). A member of the Indo-Iranian language family.
Ormozd	-	Evolved version of Ahura Mazda (see Ahura Mazda).
Pahlavi	-	From Pahlav earlier known as Parthav (see below), one of the Aryan nations (as was Persia/Pars/Parsa). The name is also loosely used to mean the Middle Persian languages written in the Pahlavi/Parthian script – languages which range from the older language of Parthian times (Arsacid Pahlavi) to the language of Sasanian times (Sasanian Pahlavi also called Parsik). Some authors advocate that the term 'Pahlavi' should only be used for the script and not the language. In Iran, the Pahlavi script was displaced by the Arabic script after the Arab invasion in the 7th

century CE, while the spoken Middle Persian language evolved into New Persian.

Pars - An Aryan kingdom in the southwest of Greater Aryana, today called the province of Fars in Iran. Fars is the Arabic version of Pars.

Parsi - Persian. Belonging to, of, or from Pars. The Zoroastrians who fled from Arab rule to India in the 8th and 9th centuries CE called themselves Parsees (Parsis). Farsi is the Arabic version of Parsi and is commonly used as the name of the modern Persian-Aryan language, New Persian, otherwise the language of Iran. Parsi is the more authentic name (than Farsi) of the Persian language.

Parthia - The Aryan kingdom whose native name is Parthav and which lay in and around the mountains called the Kopet Dag (bordering Iran and Turkmenistan) today.

Parthian - Belonging to Parthia, the westernized version of the native name Parthava.

Parthav, Parthava - See Parthia, Parthian, Pahlavan.

Persia - Western/English version of Pars (see above). A name given by the classical Greeks writers to Aryana since Pars was at one time the dominant kingdom of Aryana. Pars was earlier known as 'Parsa' and Arabized to 'Fars' since Arabic does not have the letter 'p'.

Persian - Persian mean 'from Persia' such as its people and language. However, 'Persian' is commonly used to mean 'belonging to all of Aryana'. Persian was known locally as 'Parsi' and Arabized as 'Farsi' since Arabic does not have the letter 'p'.

Rig Veda - Oldest *Veda* (see below) written in a language similar to the language of the *Avesta*.

shah-nameh - General meaning in Persian: 'chronicle of kings'. Specifically: the 10th-11th century CE Persian poet Ferdowsi's work in verse titled the *Shahnameh*. The

poet Daqiqi's shah-nameh is one of many that preceded Ferdowsi's work. Most of the earlier shah-nameh were in prose.

Vedas - Hindu scriptures of which the *Rig Veda*, the oldest, is written in a language similar to the language of the *Avesta*. nations of Old Aryana as well as an account of the deeds of King Jamsheed including his expansion of Aryan lands.

Vendidad - A book of the Zoroastrian scriptures, the *Avesta*. The name *Vendidad* is a later form of Videvdat, which is in turn a contraction of Vi-Daevo-Data, the law against devas or evil. The *Vendidad*'s verses are used by priests in purification ceremonies. The *Vendidad* is also a store of Zoroastrian history. It contains the list of the

Yasht - A book of the Zoroastrian scriptures, the *Avesta*. It is said to contain pre-Zoroastrian-information. Each Yasht (commonly translated as worship) is a hymn dedicated to Zoroastrian-ideals together with the related angel (such as the ideals of friendship, the word as bond, and kindness, and the guardian of these ideals – the angel Mithra). Originally, there were thirty Yashts, one dedicated to each named day of the month. Today only twenty-one survive.

Yasna - A book of the Zoroastrian scriptures, the *Avesta*, which contains the liturgy for the preparation of the ab-zohr/haoma extract, as well as the Gathas or hymns of Zarathushtra. Yasna (also spelt izeshne in later texts) means service, prayers and dedications – i.e. words of worship (cf. Sanskrit yajna and yana). Priests recite the *Yasna* as part of the liturgy when performing their priestly duties and functions.

Zand - Classical (primarily Middle Persian) translations, explanations, interpretations and commentaries of the scriptures, the *Avesta*, are called the Zand or Zend. The *Avesta* accompanied by the Zand is called the *Zand-Avesta*. For our purposes, we use the term Zand to include all the Middle Persian religious texts that seek to complement the *Avesta* in its full extent of 21

books. Well-known works of the Zand are the *Bundahishn* and *Denkard*.

Zartosht - Middle Persian version of Zarathushtra.

Zartoshti - Middle Persian version of Zarathushtrian.

Zarathushtra - Founder of the Zoroastrian/Zarathushtrian creed/faith/religion and its core philosophy. Zarathushtra is the English transliteration of the original name in the Avestan language and is also spelt Zarathustra.

Zarathushtri - Name for a Zoroastrian, that some feel is more authentic since it is based on the original *Avesta* name Zarathushtra and not on the Greek-based corruption Zoroaster.

Zarathushtrian - See Zarathushtri.

Zoroaster - Western version of the name Zarathushtra.

Zoroastrianism - Western name for the religion, faith and philosophy based on the teachings of Zoroaster/Zarathushtra. Authentically called Mazdayasni (Worship of God) and Behdin (Good-Religion).

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